R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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THE CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED MEXICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT. PART I.

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STRADDLING TWO CULTURES, MEXICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS ARE HAMPERED BY LANGUAGE BARRIERS AND IDENTITY PROBLEMS. THEIR SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT IS FURTHER HINDERED BY THE CULTURAL GAP WHICH EXISTS BETWEEN THEM AND THEIR ANGLO TEACHERS, AND BY THEIR CHARACTERISTIC NONCOMPETITIVE VALUES. MOREOVER, THE PATRIARCHAL, EXTENDED STRUCTURE OF THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY DEMANDS CERTAIN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FROM THE CHILDREN WHICH MAY CONFLICT WITH THOSE OF THE SCHOOL. MEXICAN-AMERICAN PARENTS PASS ON TO THEIR CHILDREN TWO BASIC VALUES WHICH ARE ANTITHETICAL TO TRADITIONAL SCHOOL VALUES--THE PLACEMENT OF ALL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE WILL OF GOD, AND A CASUAL ATTITUDE TOWARD TIME. TEACHERS OFTEN VIEW THE STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THESE CROSS CULTURAL PRESSURES AS APATHETIC BEHAVIOR. THEY NEED TO BECOME INFORMED ABOUT STUDENTS' DIFFERENCES AS WELL AS THEIR SIMILARITIES, FOR MEXICAN AMERICANS ARE QUITE DIVERSE AND MAY COME FROM ANY ONE OF EIGHT MAJOR SUBGROUPS. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "JOURNAL OF SECONDARY EDUCATION," VOLUME 42, NUMBER 2, FEBRUARY 1967. (NH)

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The Culturally Disadvantaged Mexican-American Student: Part I

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the first article of a two-part series. The second article will appear in the March, 1966, issue of the* JOURNAL.

LUIS F. HERNANDEZ

The greatest limitation facing today's teacher of the Mexican-American student is lack of knowledge of the student's culture and background. Teachers function daily in the classroom and on the playground with a concept of their students and of their students' parents which can only be described as "stereotyping." The stereotype is all-inclusive: Mexican-Americans are undependable, irresponsible, indolent, dirty, and unhealthy. They have questionable moral standards. They refuse to learn English and cling stubbornly to their native language and Mexican culture. These people refuse to help themselves, and they ignore educational opportunities. In the classroom, the children are taciturn or laconic. These children never study or do homework. They always come to class unprepared, sans books, sans pencils, sans anything. It is impossible to teach a continuous lesson because they are always absent or tardy. The majority of them are not interested in grades, and when they should be taking advantage of the opportunities offered them, they drop out. Neither Mexican-American parents nor their children take an interest in the school, or the community.

Such stereotyping, although deplorable, is understandable, for the teacher at best has access to a very narrow and limited amount of the information regarding what a Mexican-American student is in terms of his culture. Such understanding will make it possible for a teacher to identify and acknowledge the basis for some of the problems encountered in the school situation. The understanding will destroy the stereotype and bring the teacher face to face with the student himself.

A Mexican-American student, like any other American student, is a combination, a reflection, a product of a variety of characteristics which are tempered by his proximity to parental heritage, his generation as an American citizen, his economic status, the educational background of parents, and his personal and familial or really parental ambitions. It is important to understand this student in terms of these factors for they are unique as the causes or the rationale for some of the problems and behavior the teacher observes.

Many Mexican-American students are the descendants of an agrarian folk culture and, as such, have developed in a home where the parents have a reluctance to change, a limited experience in civic affairs, no real sense of social responsibility, a limited experience in handling money, a lack of need for organization, and an attitude that encourages strong individualism. The more recent the student's introduction to American urban society, the more marked will be the differences between his values and attitudes and those of that society. Some of the "new" urban values are in direct contradiction to the traditions that made possible the survival of his family in the Mexican agrarian society. Some of the traditions involve his attitudes toward his family and the meaning of life itself.

MEXICAN-AMERICAN students are young people in a state of ambiguity. They are culturally plural. They find themselves straddling two cultures. As they try to adjust their cultural heritage to the new urban society, they create problems in the home. The parents, if they are recent emigrants, find it

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difficult to understand the adjustments and become adamantly negative about changes or compromises. As a result of this conflict, many students feel they belong to no culture —that they have no real identity.

Many Mexican-American students are aware of the stigma of second-class citizenship. Early in their development, they have realized the role assigned to them by many members of the Anglo-American society, and, feeling the discrimination, have reacted with a mechanism the behavioral scientists call "ethnic self-hatred." This complex, or characteristic, shows itself in the youngsters assigning to themselves the inferior position given to them by the dominant society. Indeed, if one young person rises above the group level, he may become suspect and be forced to defend himself against members of his own resentful group as well as outsiders.

However, Mexican-Americans are generally non-competitive. Competition is not in keeping with traditional folk values. The individual is all-important. Mexican-Americans tend to expect to be judged in terms of single entities, not in terms of the group.

The school situation presents a new complex of difficulty. The Mexican-American child is to a large degree monolingual until he goes to school, where he is expected to learn to speak, read, and write English by a teacher who, in most cases, can neither speak Spanish nor understand the problems involved in learning English as a foreign language. Usually, too, the teacher does not comprehend the child's immediate background or his culture. Further, the teacher has almost no empathy with conflicts faced by the student as he suddenly is forced to become bicultural.

The forces separating student and teacher are formidable. The Mexican-American student not only is subjected to the imposition of middle class values by his teachers but also is expected to have had basic experiences in common with his teacher. That these latter experiences are common to all children the teacher takes for granted, for it is the reservoir from which the student is able to draw information, understanding and interpretation. A most relevant factor is the teacher, who must look at himself and the personality which he brings to the classroom before he can hope to understand and communicate with his student.

THE above explication contains some definite statements about Mexican-American students which should have implications for the teacher:

1. Many Mexican-American students are in conflict with traditional values and attitudes; therefore, they are in conflict with their parents.
2. These students question not only their identity but also their adequacy, for they are relegated to the position of second-class citizens by many members of the dominant society; as a result, they may develop hatred toward both groups.
3. These students find themselves straddling two cultures; therefore, they have questions about their true identity.
4. The large number of Mexican-American students who are monolingual when they enter school are taught English by teachers who have no awareness of the students' native language or of the principles involved in teaching them English as a second language.
5. These youngsters are subjected to the values and mores of their teachers who

generally come from a culture which is quite foreign to them.

6. Mexican-American students are not generally competitive yet they are expected to measure up against criteria which do not take into account their culture or heritage.

The above summarization should initially make teachers acknowledge the fact of their limited knowledge about these young people. Second, it should indicate to them that they have a responsibility to learn about this minority, which in some schools is a majority. Third, it should make the teacher desire to empathize, not to sympathize. Perhaps the teacher can reflect on his own antecedents, and review their familiar struggle for identity as a way to effect such empathy.

SOMETIMES in attempting to eliminate a stereotype, another may be created. The foregoing characterization truly does apply to many Mexican-American students; yet there may be equally as many to whom these characteristics are not applicable, or only in part applicable, or applicable to a lesser degree. The reason for such divergence can be attributed to the existence of a great variety of Mexican-Americans. The Mexican-American students can come from any one of the eight major groups, some of which have elements in common:

1. He may be the descendant of an early California family.
2. He may be second- or third-generation from a family of political refugees who came here during the Revolution of 1910-1920.
3. He may be a second- or third-generation of agricultural workers who came here as contract laborers during World War I.

If he is any of these three, the youngster generally is Americanized. He has a little knowledge of his Mexican heritage and probably speaks little or no Spanish.

4. He may be the child of a *bracero* or farm worker who was recently brought from Mexico to the United States under contract.
5. He may be a *Tejano,* an emigrant from Texas, where until recently he developed under marked discrimination.
6. He may be a recent arrival from Mexico.

Young people from these three categories are generally Spanish-speaking and tend to hold on tightly to Mexican traditions and customs.

7. He may possibly be an Hispano, who is an emigrant from New Mexico. He probably considers himself more Spanish than Mexican. (There is sufficient historical fact to substantiate his claim.)
8. He may be an emigrant from other southwestern states.

Children in these last two categories are generally well assimilated. The visibility factor has so many variances it is pointless to explore it. Clearly, Mexican-American children cannot easily be classified, nor, even less easily, predicted. However, there are certain recognizable ethnic patterns which generally are existent in Mexican-American young people. The relationship between these patterns and behavioral traits in school is most revealing.

Most Mexican-American youngsters reflect a tight patriarchal family. Within this unit, the mother is the center. The father is all authority, and the eldest male child is his potential heir. The boys of the family are honor-bound to defend their sisters. The

family unit includes not only the parents and their children but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and *compadres*. To this organization a child owes his first loyalty. In turn, he counts on his family for individual need and security during a period of crisis. The family is his all in all.

KNOWLEDGE of the family structure provides the teacher with some insight into many problems he may face as he works with these young people: the lack of interest or desire to be involved in school shown by both parent and student; a dependency on being told what to do and how to do it; a lack of initiative; the need to be absent from school very often. The family further provides the outlines for the roles of the female and the male, so that the child rarely has any doubt about how he should behave. A boy is nurtured on the idea that he is developing into a man, and as such he is a macho, and must behave *a lo macho* or *ser muy hombre*. This *machismo* accounts for the bravado in so many young men, their reckless bravery, the need to defend honor, the urge to establish an image before girls and other friends. It also makes understandable the boys' strong sense of responsibility for the family. It may, indeed, explain why so many boys quit school early or take long periods of absence in order to take advantage of jobs. And of course it is not to be overlooked that a boy will feel much more *macho* if he is standing on his own two feet.

The girl soon feels the weight of her role, for on her falls the responsibility for the younger siblings, or for helping with endless chores in maintaining the home. In the absence of mother, for whatever reason, the girl and her younger sisters continue the cooking, cleaning, and caring that are essential to a home.

In the process of acculturization, too many families undergo circumstances which upset or seriously disrupt this orderly unit. Often the father is unable to provide an income that will support such a structure. The mother must go to work. In such a situation, the father's *machismo* suffers and his role as head of the family becomes a nominal one. The mother, with the independence that she achieves as a contributor to the family income, begins to expect a more dominant role in family decisions. The children, unsupervised, gradually lose the sense of security of the home and of the control of parental authority. The entire traditional structure inevitably collapses. To the teacher seeking to know causes for students' behavior, such disintegration of the family unit possibly provides explanations for: absenteeism, failure to come to class prepared, missing homework, lack of cleanliness, poor health, emotionally upset youngsters, early dropouts.

Most Mexican-American children grow up hearing and seeing the practice of two basic philosophies which underlie the entire social, economic and educational structure of their world. These philosophies are constantly offered in such expressions: "Dios dirá," (literally, God will tell; or it is in the hands of God); and "Hay más tiempo que vida" (literally, there is more time than there is life).

The first philosophy, "Dios dirá," places responsibility in the will of God: life, health, sickness and death, failures, wealth, fortune and misfortune are in His hands. God will determine what is to be. The concept can easily place limitation on planning for the future, on ambitions for furthering one's self,

on carrying through with assumed obligations, and as easily provide a rationalization for failure.

The second proverb, "Hay más tiempo que vida," further strengthens the first concept in that it reinforces the justification for limited planning for the future. It permits procrastination; it relieves the individual of the pressures of deadlines and promptness. It allows for improvidence: Why worry about tomorrow, for there may not be a tomorrow, if God wills it.

Philosophically, the teacher will find himself in conflict with the student. The teacher with his middle class values does not recognize or tolerate such a concept of life. Yet the teacher must understand that the philosophy may account for the students' attitudes towards meeting classwork deadlines, studying for examinations, coming to class prepared, regular attendance, concern for their own future. He must understand, too, that an attendant part of this attitude is that these students will respond to a reward given as soon as the job is completed. Work that can be finished in a short period of time will probably be done better and more quickly than a lengthy project.

WHEN his family has quite recently immigrated, the Mexican-American student finds that his accustomed attitudes towards education are contrary to those held by the dominant American society. His parents look upon school not as means to an end but as their fulfillment of an obligation imposed on them by the government. The student's achievement at school does not receive much comment at home. If the student satisfies the government's requirement, by attending school, the parents have given the government its due. At the school's portal the parents' responsibility ends; the student must face the problems of adjustment to this foreign environment on his own.

Analysis reveals the student carrying by himself the burden of scholastic achievement. He alone must overcome his language handicap, accept the new values thrust upon him, understand the foreign world into which he is thrown. Alone, he will have to find worth in what he is being taught. Alone, he weighs and chooses sides in the conflict of values and attitudes. If the student is fortunate enough to be very bright, he may bridge the gap and catch up with his adjusted peers. He may be imbued with the spirit of competition, and excel. He may even aspire to higher education. But this youngster is the exception. The majority suffers the frustration inherent in the solitary struggle. The outcome generally is that the young person decides he is not capable and classifies himself an inferior. Such a self-image often causes anti-social behavior in school and the community; it encourages his becoming a dropout or a delinquent.

Repeatedly, teachers complain that the Mexican-American students in their classrooms are taciturn and laconic; that they seem to be without interest or enthusiasm. Yet, teachers should be able to discern a weak self-image as the reason behind such behavior. Moreover, teachers should be able to analyze the evolution of such an image. For one thing, the student is labeled as being different at an age when it is natural for children to want to be alike. Second, he is labeled as being second-class because of his culture and background. In the third place, since he cannot function successfully in the educational system provided for him, he is classified as intellectually

inadequate. Fourth, the future holds very little promise, for he constantly sees lack of achievement at home and in his community. Fifth, he receives very little understanding from home or from the dominant society. And, finally, he lives in an area that is surrounded by a system full of prejudice, or one that will discriminate against him because of his heritage, social-economic level, language or even his appearance.

BUT there are teachers who label this taciturnity, laconism, apathy as a language handicap. The fact is that many Mexican-American students perform most successfully in English, despite intonation, accent and some nonstandard usage, and if they are properly motivated, they lose the habitual monosyllabic response, or disinterested manner. Our investigation has shown that employers do not eliminate job candidates because of intonation of oral English, or accent, or occasional nonstandard usage; rather, they reject on the basis of lack of confidence or self-assurance,[1] Investigation seems also to indicate that students themselves intensify their accents, intonation and nonstandard usage after the seventh grade. They tend to emphasize the use of the Spanish language in situations where they are involved with their peers or where its use might create a discomfort for an adult in authority. The students show no lack of ability or desire to communicate in the company of friends or peers. Obviously, there is no real language handicap; but, obviously, there is a problem.

The problem itself may be the matter of identity, that all-encompassing preoccupation that marks the stage of adolescence. Why does the Anglo teenager affect strange dress and hair-do, way-out behavior? We understand: all young people go through this search for identity as they develop into individuals. Then let us understand that the Mexican-American teenager must go through the same process. He is bombarded by the same advertisements and general commercialism as is his Anglo counterpart.

But he is not Anglo, and cannot affect Anglo fashions and fads. He chooses his own and adjusts them to fit his needs. He feels in this way he has established his identity, like all teenagers placing the emphasis on façade, or physical identity. Indeed, he does get such recognition from his peers, but he wants more. The Mexican-American youngster wants the valued recognition of his parents and teachers. Unfortunately neither of these sources offers the reassuring reaction; the response is one of negation, denial, disapproval. His parents cry. "!No somos así!"—We are not like that! The teacher declares, "No, you are not right. You look wrong. We do not accept you." Ironically, the disapproving teacher is a representative of the alien community which has forced into being this unacceptably dressed and groomed individual. For the Anglo school itself is an enclave into the Mexican-American community. It judges, it imposes, it demands: seldom does it approve or understand; rarely does it channel or guide these youngsters seeking their unique identities. In terms of values unfamiliar to him and dominant over him, the Mexican-American teenager is deemed inferior.

Part I of this article has presented an inquiry into the shortcomings of our educational system in terms of meeting the needs of Mexican-American youngsters. It has investigated the Mexican-American stereotype and the reality of his identity. It has exposed

lack of understanding which characterizes the preparation of these people for the world they enter.

Part II will present an insight into the Mexican-American community, the problems faced by the Mexican-American outside of the ghetto, and some practical application that should aid many teachers in meeting the needs of these students. Part II will appear in the March issue of the *Journal*.

REFERENCE

[1] Hernandez, Luis F. and Kenneth R. Johnson, "Teaching Standard Oral English to Mexican-American and Negro Students for Better Vocational Opportunities"; Los Angeles City School Districts, Div. Sec. Ed.; Specially Funded Programs.